i have big feelings

BY

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ABSTRACT

i have big feelings attempts to bring into conversation several influential modes of thought in contemporary transnational, feminist, queer, and affective critical theory. The exhibition comprises an installation of larger-than-life-size aluminum mesh disproportioned bodies suspended in a web of strings, and a suite of monotype prints describing similarly disfigured subjects, all grappling with relationality. My methodology in this effort is informed by the conceptual underpinnings and sensibility afforded me by a printmaking background, and the work itself seeks to play expansively with printmaking to the point of frayed medium specificity. The show relies on a building up of layers to put disparate ideas into conversation with each other and highlights the moment of encounter as a constitutive force. The work raises questions around communitarian and relational interaction and the constitutive effects of discourse and encounter. Through minoritarian performances, it seeks to escape the totalizing present of modernity and to locate utopian openings in modernist discourse through the mining for traces of a queer past in the present.

INTRODUCTION

> *We are flesh and part of the flesh of the world. As such* we change *the things we encounter.*[1]

i have big feelings begins and ends with the question of embodiment. The exhibition comprises an installation of larger-than-life-size aluminum mesh (disproportioned) bodies suspended in a web of strings (Fig. 1), and a suite of monotype prints describing similarly disfigured subjects (Fig. 2), all grappling with relationality. The gallery dimly lit, spectators navigate between the sculptural figures in the installation cautiously and with a shifting attention to space, surface, and safety. The mesh figures themselves can be hard to locate and differentiate; lit by three floor-level spotlights, their surfaces elide with their interiors, with each other, and with their shadows projected onto the walls, multiplying the five tangible figures and charging the space with a sense of crowdedness (Fig. 3). The tangled strings that suspend them are similarly problematic: difficult to detect until at a close range, and careening at unpredictable angles, one encounters them suddenly as one maneuvers between figures, often startling at the proximity of material. Compounding the multiplicity of layers, the viewers' own shadows and bodies intersect and overlay with those of the sculptures from the moment they enter the space of the gallery. As viewers move through the installation (or even past it) the projections of their bodies and those of the sculptures slide past and through each other across the walls, generating dramatic time-sensitive drawings (Fig. 5-8).

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[1] Jones, Amelia. Cited in Chambers-Letson, J.T. and Pietrobono, K., 2011, 23.

Across the gallery, a wall of less conspicuous monotype prints offers a second iteration of the installation. The prints describe similarly awkwardly defined figures, mostly solitary and with very little context or ground. Their surfaces open up much as the mesh figures' do—their porousness having been exaggerated to an absurd scale (Fig. 9-12). Despite their isolation, the prints' titles all hint at relationships and correspondent feelings: *That time we held hands all day*, *You can always come home with us*, *Are we friends?*, etc. Looking back towards the installation from across the gallery, a viewer encounters one final composition. The installation as framed by the gallery architecture recalls the compositions of the prints and generously opens up possibility: that in crossing the room, one might cross over into the depicted world of the prints where one's body will encounter the figured bodies if only on the level of shadow. In fact, in order to leave the gallery, the viewer *must* once again cross the divide and in so doing make bodily contact.

I describe the experience of encountering this installation because it is precisely that—the encounter and our subsequent enmeshment in the work—that I am most interested in. Informed by transnational feminist and queer theory, phenomenology, and affective studies, this body of work seeks to investigate relationality and how bodies are constituted through their relationships with each other. In so doing, the work emphasizes a performative analysis of experience, encounter, and embodiment and forms a contingent critique of modernity, its emphasis on normativity and self-containment, and its dismissal of materiality.

GENEALOGY

In a very basic sense, I intend *i have big feelings* to function as both critique of and intervention into modernist ideologies. Charting a genealogy of modernism is a daunting task, but one somewhat alleviated by Bruno Latour's interrogation of the myth of modernism in *We Have Never Been Modern*[2], wherein he argues that modernity itself—the bifurcation of nature/culture, self/other, subject/object that one might trace from Plato through Descartes and beyond—has always lived alongside other ideologies, belying its claim to absolutism and ontological authority. Rather than promote postmodernism (which he contends reifies modernism's claim to absolute authority by relegating it to a past and veritable era), Latour challenges us to consider the destabilizing logic of anti-modernism that activates a spatialized conception of multiple epistemologies, including a legitimate past.[3] In so doing, Latour offers us an expansive strategy for unlearning the myth of self-containment (that I exist within the 'sack' of my body) and self-reliance (through competition I will advance myself and secure my well-being) that function in service of neoliberal values and practices. Through engaging with the past from a sympathetic and recuperative position (rather than from the critical and distancing position of postmodernism), I hope to mobilize a certain amount of hope for seeing and understanding relationships and their potential for opening up possibilities in the present.

Contemporary scholars in cultural and affective studies are fond of discussing affective excess or surplus—the notion that 'extra' affect (out-of-proportion humor, horror, surprise, or glee, for example) imbues the past and present with

[2] Latour, Bruno, 1993.
[3] Ibid., p. 47.

the potential to be mined for *what else* is hinted at. José Muñoz describes this as a very queer notion: to deploy gesture—"a knowing glance, cool cruising, a lingering handshake"—to communicate something extra to those 'in the know', i.e., those with certain lived experiences that render specific visual frequencies accessible.[4] This project represents an attempt to revisit the past in such a mining effort, with an eye towards reframing contemporary political strategies and beginning the slow work of collective healing.

I locate a precedent for such a strategy evidenced in works by contemporary and recent queer artists—in Felix Gonzalez-Torres' parenthetical subtitles ["*Untitled (Perfect Lovers)*"] or Cary Leibowitz's emphatically affective outbursts ("I CAN'T I DON'T FEEL WELL"). In both of the above artists' refusal to figure the body, I locate, too, a certain suggested embodiment, in that the viewers' own bodies constitute the subjectivity of the works, if only in their role as disseminators of the printed ephemera. However, arguably, the viewers do more than disseminate the work; they enact it by choosing to engage with and acquire it, and by each understanding it *differently.*

The idea that the audience completes a work is not new; it is possibly a defining characteristic of most Western canonical art from the early 20th century onward. But despite an emphasis on phenomenological engagement from at least minimalism forward, the multivalence of one's audience was relatively recently championed by postmodernism. Both Gonzalez-Torres and Leibowitz take advantage of this notion and emanate intentionally ambiguous declarations to be taken up repeatedly and variously by their audiences.

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[4] Muñoz, José, 2009, 65.

I am interested also in their deployment of personal disclosure, which often tends towards the erotic. George Bataille described eroticism as “in essence, a form of bodily excess, in which the integrity of selfhood is inherently endangered.”[5] I find that both Gonzalez-Torres and Leibowitz poetically weave together affective concerns, references to their viewers’ bodies, and bodily excess in order to queerly evidence a commitment to relationality and investigate power relationships as well as invest their work with evidence of queerness. In this thesis project, I have self-consciously taken my cues from these artists’ estimable approaches and mobilized them in service of a gesture of self-reflection, healing, and hope.

FEELING BIG FEELINGS

In approaching this project, I considered how I might take up the strands described above and put them in conversation with each other. What kind of space does that imply? And how to do justice to what seemed to me very nuanced and interrelated but potentially contradictory ideas? I ultimately decided that to put them in proximity was to give them the opportunity to inform each other and to give a viewer an opportunity to consider them as mutually constituted. In this sense, I approached this project using a printmaking sensibility: when working in layers, a printmaker has the opportunity to allow multiple lines of thought to intersect and inform one another, and in the collapsing of temporal registers, priority often gives way to a more poetic *besideness*—a paradox (para=”beside”, doxica=”inherited knowledge”). Thus, I began to

[5] Bataille, George. Cited in Spector, Nancy, 1995, 150.

conceive of a space that would provide opportunities (but not necessarily directives) for interaction.

Throughout the exhibition, I explored openings for *besideness* and conversation: in the division of the gallery into two halves that mirror and invite reflection; in the transparency of the mesh figures, allowing one to see through one figure to another and to their shadows; in the positioning of light sources so that each figure as well as each viewer casts multiple shadows that interact dynamically; in the blurring of media specificity between drawn line and line in space—in that the literal strings often terminate at points on the wall where the shadows of strings begin, thus continuing the line and penetrating through the surface of the wall; and in the layering of literally figured embodiment and the suggested embodiment of shadows and first-person personal disclosure.

The mesh figures' transparency and printed figures' porousness reference an ambiguity of excess and deficit. Both materials are insufficient to fully describe a closed surface. In the case of the mesh, the open surface provides an opportunity to see past the surface to an interior—one that only mirrors the exterior in information and in fact provides little resistance from other objects beyond the far side of the figure. On the other hand, the gridded texture of the mesh once doubled, tripled, quadrupled, results in a moiré effect that surprisingly communicates very nuanced information about surface and planer shifts (Fig. 4). The layering of black mesh against a white wall also references the figure/ground relationship of printed text on paper, a relationship that is arguably inverted when one looks through multiple layers of mesh at one time; in the latter case, the black mesh interactions form their own kind of 'ground texture' against which the

viewers might project themselves or each other as embodied figures. In the case of the printed subjects, their surface texture was achieved through a generous application of paint onto a plexiglass plate; in its inability to hold the paint well, the plate and excess water caused the paint to bead off the surface—the effect being one of both “too much material” and “not enough information.”

Both mesh and printed figures also function as grounds against which the viewer might project their own fleshiness. In that sense, the layers of black mesh function almost as a landscape; in their decided lack of fleshiness and opacity, the viewer is encouraged to project their own fleshiness, or that of other viewers, onto and into the mesh bodies themselves. The mesh figure installation functions as a container for holding our self-projections, complicated all the more by their shared dimensionality in shadow form on the wall. The prints also encourage a self-projection and consciousness of fleshiness; they are titled in the first person, such that as one reads a title, they are engaging in a performative act of identification.

The self-confessional titles of the monotypes refer to specific memories I have about relationships with people in my life. Although most likely impossible to access in specificity, those disclosures invest the work with my own big feelings. In offering them publically, I am making two gestures. The first is a gesture of loosening/letting go: I am inviting others to inhabit and reiterate intimate moments in my life. The second related gesture is one of trust between me and my audience: I am offering *them* my important personal memories. I am sharing *myself* with them. I feel also that in so doing, I am injecting a certain amount of affective surplus into the work; I am consciously investing it with extra potential.

In discussing my own queer investment in my work, I am inclined also to discuss what might appear to be its lack: that my own orientation or location within the work is not always named or explicit. This strategy has multiple rationalizations, the most compelling of which relates to José Muñoz' writings about gesture, ephemera, and evidence of queerness:

> Queerness has an especially vexed relationship to evidence…Queerness is rarely complemented by evidence, or at least by traditional understandings of the term. The key to queering evidence, and by that I mean the ways in which we prove queerness and read queerness, is by suturing it to the concept of ephemera. Think of ephemera as trace, the remains, the things that are left, hanging in the air like a rumor.[6]

What he designates as ephemera, here, are the remains, the excess, embedded in queer acts. I intend for my own queer gestures to function as nods towards something extra as well—something that might hang as a trace in the air. Something to be found sooner or later. Something that helps us see that this moment is fuller than we might know, and that opens us up to hope.

CONCLUSION

i have big feelings attempts to bring into conversation several influential modes of thought in contemporary feminist, queer, and affective critical theory. My methodology in this effort is informed by the conceptual underpinnings and sensibility afforded me by a printmaking background, and the work itself seeks to play expansively with printmaking to the point of frayed medium specificity. The work presents anti-normative subject-citizens en masse as a refusal of dominant normative narratives of perversion and isolation and raises questions around

[6] Muñoz, José, 2009, 65.

communitarian and relational interaction and the constitutive effects of discourse and encounter. Through minoritarian performances, it seeks to escape the totalizing present of modernity and to locate utopian openings in modernist discourse through the mining for traces of a queer past in the present.

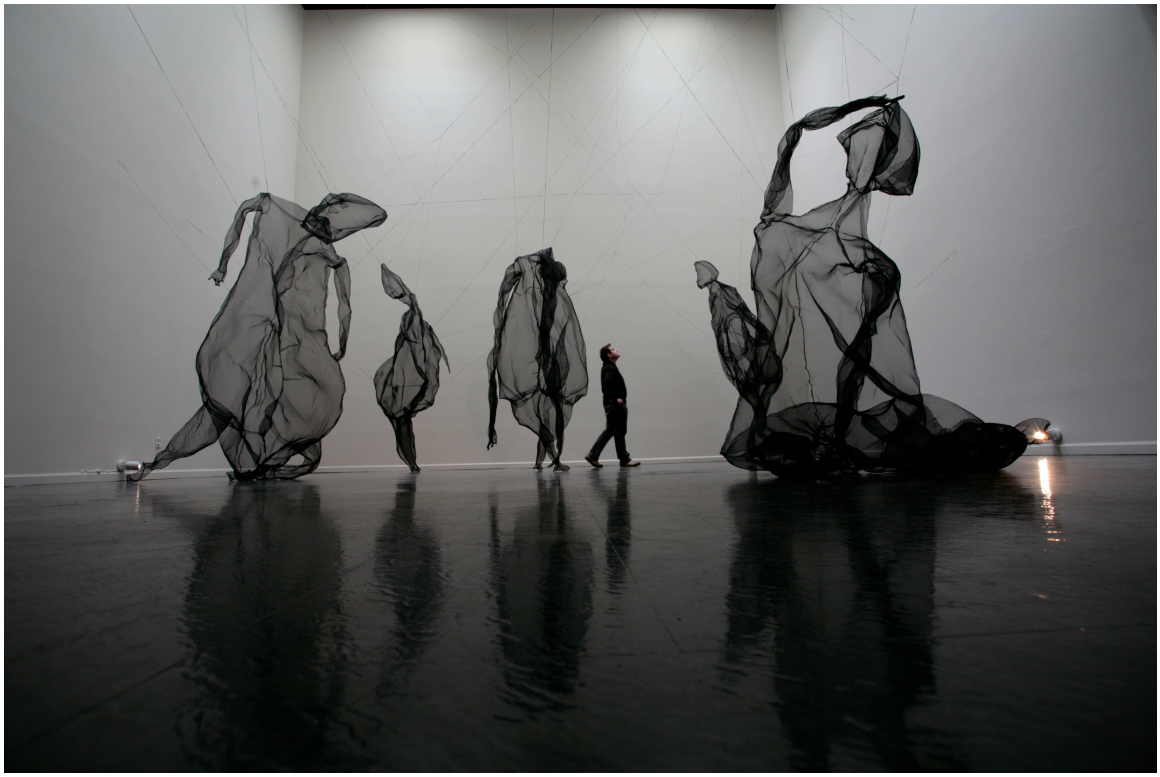

Fig. 1. *i have big feelings* (installation view), aluminum mesh, sinew.

Fig. 2. *i have big feelings* (installation view of monoprints).

Fig. 3. *i have big feelings* (installation view with shadows), aluminum mesh, sinew.

Fig. 4. *i have big feelings* (installation view detail), aluminum mesh, sinew.

Fig. 5. *i have big feelings* (interaction with viewer's shadow #1), aluminum mesh, sinew.

Fig. 6. *i have big feelings* (interaction with viewer's shadow #2), aluminum mesh, sinew.

Fig. 7. *i have big feelings* (interaction with viewer's shadow #3), aluminum mesh, sinew.

Fig. 8. *i have big feelings* (interaction with viewer's shadow #4), aluminum mesh, sinew.

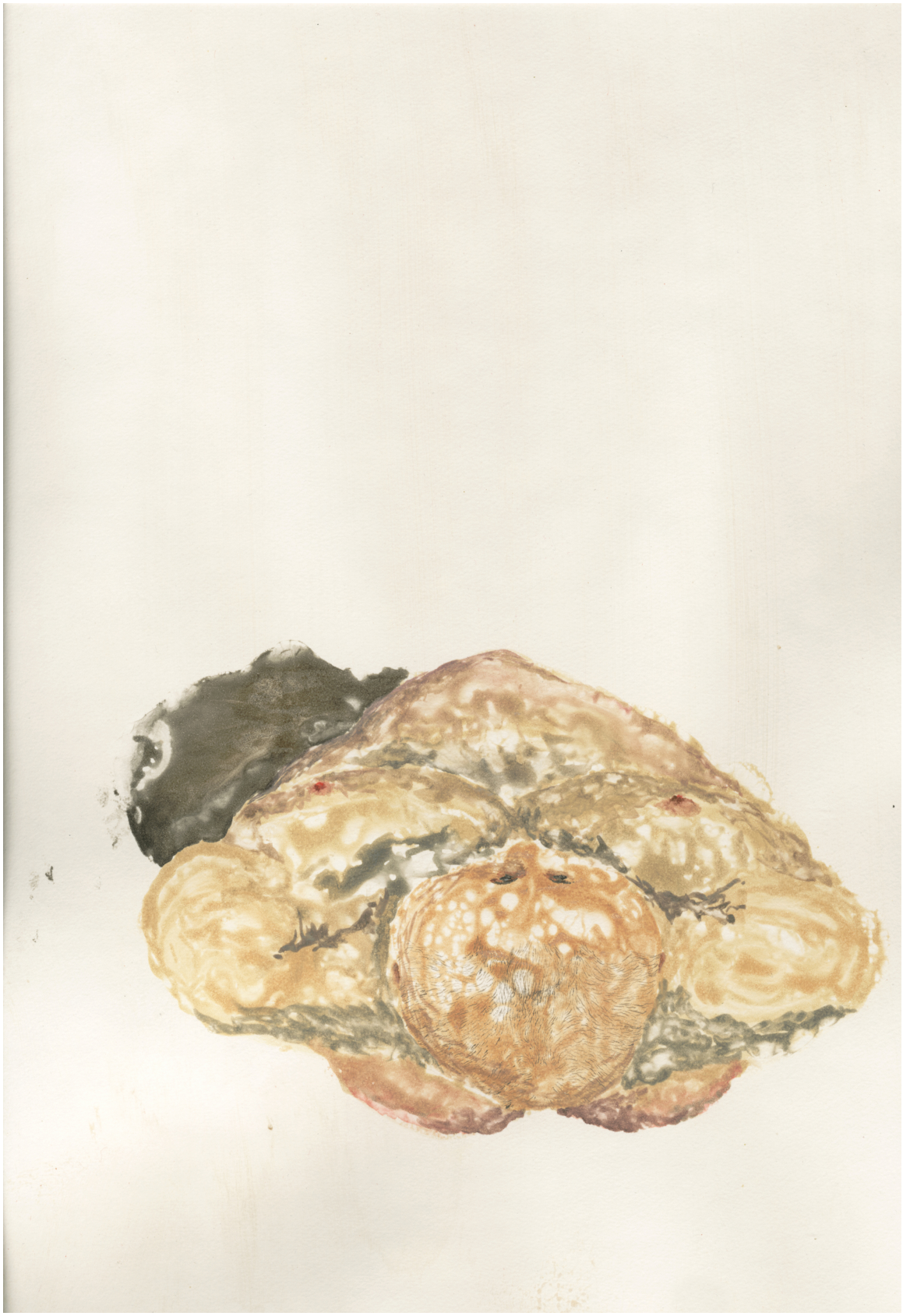

Fig. 9. *For a long time I wondered if he could still see me*, Watercolor monotype, 22 x 30”.

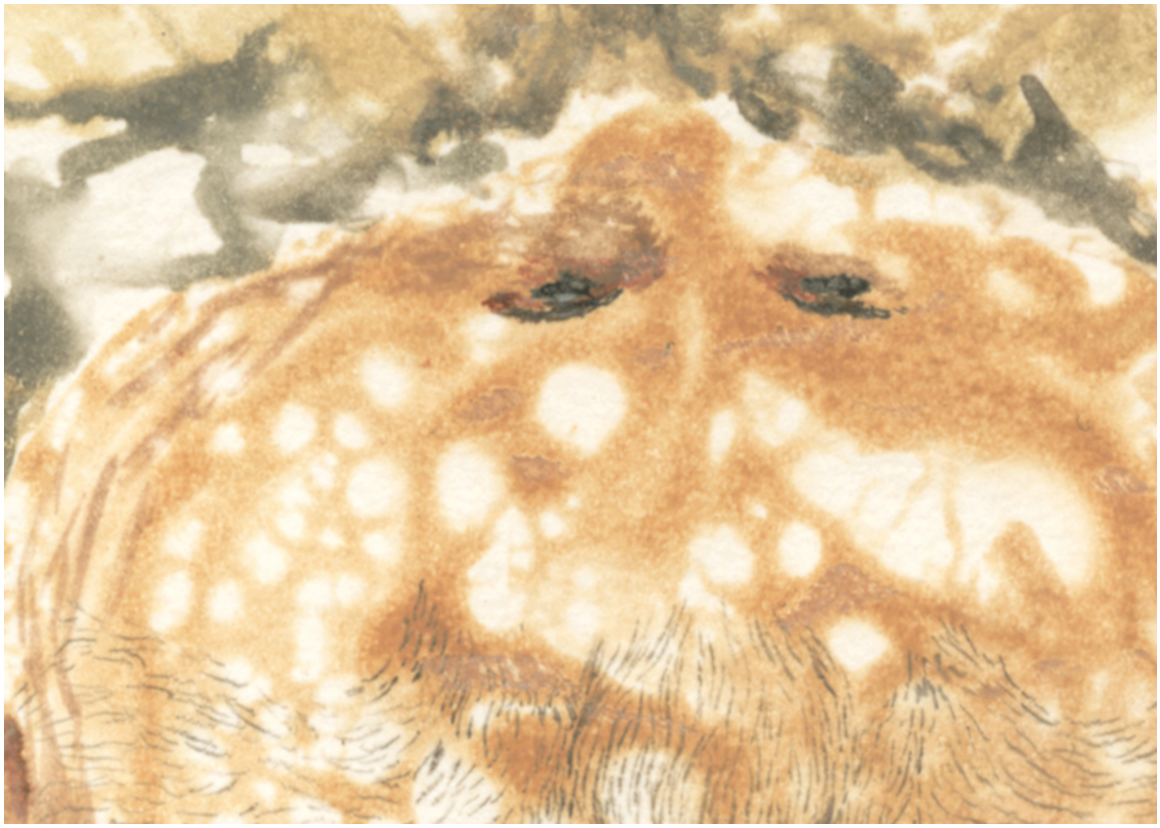

Fig. 10. *For a long time I wondered if he could still see me* (detail), Watercolor monotype, 22 x 30”.

Fig. 11. *He threw the hammer and it broke*, Watercolor monotype, 22 x 30”.

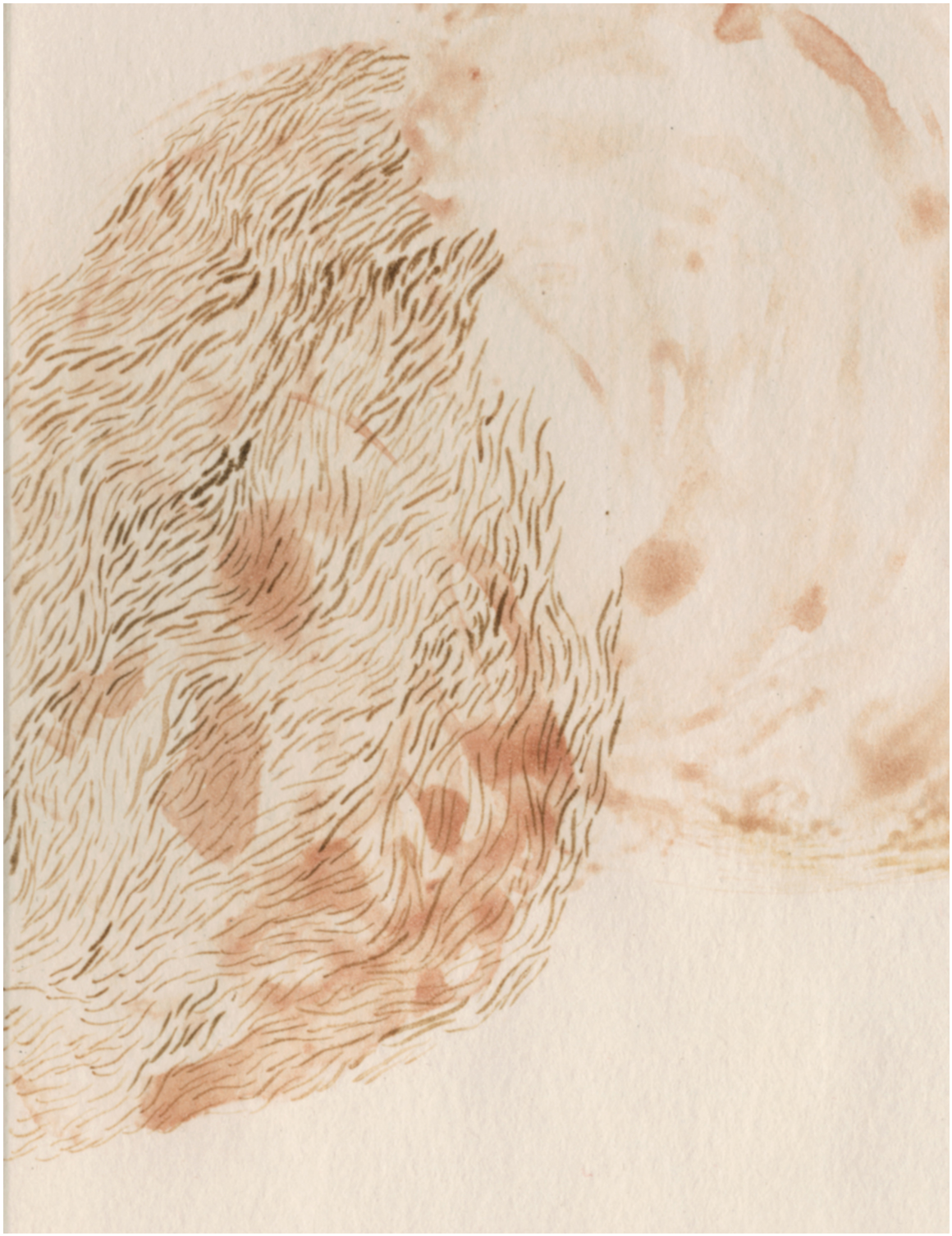

Fig. 12. *He threw the hammer and it broke* (detail), Watercolor monotype, 22 x 30”.

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